

# The interaction of animacy and number agreement: An experimental investigation

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## Abstract

This paper investigates subject–verb agreement in Turkish with particular focus on the role the animacy of plural subjects plays in verbal number marking. Previous descriptive grammars of Turkish (e.g., Sezer, 1978) report an asymmetry in number marking for plural subjects: if the plural subject denotes an animate entity, both plural and singular verbs are possible, whereas only singular verbs are possible when the plural subject denotes an inanimate entity. Using the magnitude estimation method, we measured the well-formedness of simple Turkish sentences consisting of a plural subject and a verb in two groups of participants that differ only in age (mean: 28 years old and 43 years old). The overall results provide an empirical validation of the proposed split between animate and inanimate subjects and suggest that the acceptability of plural agreement is sensitive to even more fine-grained distinctions of animacy. In particular, the plural dispreference was reduced for inanimates with a teleological capacity (in the sense of Folli and Harley, 2008) and for body parts, in comparison to true inanimates (e.g., furniture and clothes). Accordingly, we propose an animacy hierarchy for Turkish that is in line with typological observations (e.g., Corbett, 2000, 2006) and augment it with a further distinction between quasi-inanimates and inanimates.

Although less pronounced in sentences with animate subjects, we observed a higher preference for singular verbs over plural verbs across all conditions. This suggests that the singular marking on the verb, which is zero marked in Turkish, is the default. Furthermore, we find a significant effect of age: in the older group, the singular preference is less pronounced across the conditions and almost absent in sentences with an animate subject. Moreover, the older participants made finer distinctions in the animacy hierarchy, further differentiating between two types of quasi-inanimates (teleologically capable entities vs. entities with inherited animacy). The two generations in our study share the animate–inanimate split as well as the sharp contrast between singular and plural agreement in sentences with inanimate subjects; they differ, however, in degree of optionality. Altogether, these results suggest a decrease in the degree of optionality across generations. As in research on language attrition and bilingualism (Hulk and Müller, 2000; Müller and Hulk, 2001; Sorace, 2011), the results accord with the idea that interface phenomena are vulnerable to change; however, non-convergence between generations in our study stemmed from areas that yield gradient rather than categorical results.

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**Keywords:** Subject verb agreement in Turkish; Number marking; Animacy; Optionality; Gradience; Semantics morphosyntax interface; Language change

**Abbreviations:** ABL, ablative; ACC, accusative; AOR, aorist; ART, article; AUX, auxiliary; CL, clitic; CMP, compound marker; DAT, dative; ERG, ergative; F, feminine; GEN, genitive; INF, infinitive; LOC, locative; M, masculine; NEG, negation, negative; PART, participle; PASS, passive; PFV, perfective; PL, plural; POSS, possessive; PROG, progressive; PST, past; Q, interrogative particle; REAL, realis mood; REL, relative; REP, reported; SG, singular; SUP, superlative.

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## 1. Introduction

Crosslinguistic research has shown that animacy may interact with grammatical phenomena in various ways (e.g., Corbett, 2000; Croft, 1990; Yamamoto, 1999). The animacy level of nouns has been shown to constrain, for example, overt number marking of noun phrases (e.g., Haspelmath, 2013; Corbett, 2000; Croft, 1990), case marking (e.g., Comrie, 1989; Kittilä et al., 2011), word order (e.g., Croft, 1990; Hale, 1973), discourse topicality (e.g., Givón, 1983) and thematic roles (Van Valin and LaPolla, 1997), as well as grammatical prominence in the realization of entities (Zaenen et al., 2004). Subject–verb agreement is yet another phenomenon that is sensitive to animacy in the languages of the world (e.g., Comrie, 1989; Corbett, 2000). Commonly, verbs may agree with noun phrases denoting animate entities, and may fail to agree with those denoting inanimate ones (Comrie, 1989:191).

In this paper, we investigate the nature and strength of animacy as a constraint on number marking on verbs in Turkish. In Turkish the occurrence of plural marking on the verb depends among other variables, on the animacy of the plural subject (e.g., Sezer, 1978). Animate plural subjects may take either a plural or singular verb. Inanimate plural subjects, in contrast, are restricted to singular verbs, as shown in (1). In other words, plural agreement is ‘optional’ in sentences with nominal plural subjects denoting animate entities, as in (1a), but illicit in those denoting inanimate entities, as in (1b).

(1) Subject–verb number agreement in Turkish (from Sezer, 1978:26)<sup>1</sup>:

- a. Animate plural subject:  
*Çilingir-ler kapı-lar-ı aç-tı-(lar).*  
 locksmith-PL door-PL-ACC open-PST-(3PL)  
 ‘Locksmiths opened the doors’.
- b. Inanimate plural subject:  
*Anahtar-lar kapı-lar-ı aç-tı-\*(lar).*  
 key-PL door-PL-ACC open-PST-\*3PL  
 ‘Keys opened the doors’.

By ‘optionality’ we do not imply randomness. Instead, we use the term as a descriptive tool to refer to the existence of two grammatical options for verbs (i.e., singular or plural) when their overt subject is third person plural. Thus optionality here is used to describe the availability of both structures namely singular and plural verbs. As will be shown below, subject–verb number agreement is systematically constrained by the semantic features of plural subjects, i.e., their level of animacy. The use of structures that are described as optional in grammar indeed require a choice based on semantic or discourse-pragmatic factors although these interactions may not be visible at surface. That is, the use of optional structures is not free or random as such, which accords with Kilgarriff’s (2005) observation that language is essentially non-random.

Although previous descriptions of Turkish indicate that animacy of plural subjects plays a determinant role in number marking on verbs (e.g., Sezer, 1978), these descriptions have been by and large based on researchers’ own intuitions, and thus crucially lack empirical support. Hitherto, there is no study that has systematically investigated the extent of optionality in number marking on the verb and how it is modulated by the degree of animacy of the subject in Turkish. Furthermore, whether the agreement phenomenon also shows sensitivity to typologically attested sub-distinctions (e.g., kinship terms, higher vs. lower animals, etc.) within the main animacy categories (e.g., Corbett, 2000:70; Haspelmath, 2013; see below for details) begs for an empirical investigation. Here, we aim to fill these gaps on the basis of an experimental study measuring Turkish native speakers’ intuitions on the interaction between animacy and subject–verb number agreement. We further test whether there is age-modulated variation in Turkish speakers’ intuitions on agreement. Below, we explain our research aims in the context of theoretical and empirical issues related to the agreement phenomenon under investigation.

Sorace and Keller (2005) distinguish two types of constraints in grammar: *hard constraints*, the violation of which leads to strong unacceptability, and *soft constraints*, which only lead to mild unacceptability when violated. According to Sorace and Keller (2005), hard constraints are purely structural (e.g., syntactic) in nature, while soft constraints apply at the interface between syntax and other domains (e.g., semantics or pragmatics). On the basis of this distinction between constraint types, the notion of animacy, arguably a semantic property, can be characterized as imposing a *soft* constraint for Turkish verbal agreement, the violation of which should yield gradient effects rather than categorical ones. Indeed, the *perception* of animacy has been shown to be gradient in some languages. For example, through establishing a conceptual framework of animacy by analyzing English and Japanese parallel corpora, Yamamoto (1999) shows that not all animate beings are equally animate in speakers’ perception, some are more centrally animate (e.g., biologically alive, intelligent,

<sup>1</sup> Glosses in the Turkish examples used throughout the paper are adapted for consistency when necessary. Those for the languages other than Turkish, however, are taken from the authors cited.

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